

Out of the Darkness

Anne Rice, the queen of Gothic fiction, has found Christ and dedicated her writing to God. She recently talked with Charisma about her life and how it changed.

The author of *The Queen of the Damned* is now worshiping the King of kings.

Anne Rice, the acclaimed icon of modern Gothic fiction, who once rode in a coffin through her native New Orleans in the back of a blacked-out hearse flanked by a horde of personal undertakers, is writing Christian fiction and has vowed never to write anything else.

Books about vampires, witches and erotica by the Southern author have sold more than 100 million copies. They have made a household name of the vampire Lestat, who was the subject of a Tony-nominated Broadway musical in 2006 and who was played by Tom Cruise in the 1994 film adaptation of Rice's first novel, *Interview With the Vampire*.

It was therefore startling to her publisher and millions of readers when in 2003 Rice, then known as an avowed atheist, announced that her 26th book would be a fictional first-person narrative given by Jesus at age 7, titled *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*.

Not only would the book be about Christ and not Lestat or a similar figure, but it also would have the "audacity" to delve into Jesus' incarnation, how He came to realize He was both man and God, and when He began His battle with Satan. It has sold more than 400,000 copies since going on sale in November 2005 and was listed 13 weeks on the New York Times best-sellers list. It dares to answer questions on which the Bible is largely silent.

Rice's surprising shift in subject matter was closely aligned with her return in 1998 to her spiritual roots in the Roman Catholic Church—a move that has been chronicled in print by Newsday and The New York Times and discussed during television appearances on Today, Good Morning America, The O'Reilly Factor and other programs. The year after she announced Christ the Lord, as if punctuating the new direction she intended her stories to take, Rice left her Louisiana home of many years and moved to California.

She lives today in Rancho Mirage near Palm Springs in an enormous house—a single-story, pale-yellow edifice of stucco and glass that sits behind two sets of gates and includes a massive library with thousands of volumes on theology and church history. Open, bright and airy, it is far different from her lush, ornate and historic New Orleans mansion—the scene of lavish parties hosted by Rice, clad perpetually in black, and her atheist husband, Stan Rice.

Her guest house in Rancho Mirage is home to her assistant, Sue Tebbe, and to a young man named Becket Ghioto, a former Benedictine monk with a master's degree in theology who helps Rice with research and enjoys playing the baby grand piano in the author's tennis-court sized living room.

The main house is filled with religious statues. Yet hanging in a hallway is a painting, one of about 300 by Rice's late husband, that depicts in gay colors a playful demon who is perhaps Lucifer himself seducing a coy but obviously delighted, unclothed woman.

Rice enters the room, tiny but looking trim and vibrant today at 66, and sits on a tan overstuffed couch. Her Irish-brown

eyes hold an unexpected sparkle and peace. She talks fast and laughs often.

Telling the Old, Old Story

“We’ve been telling the story of Jesus for over 2,000 years, and it has as much power today as it ever did,” Rice states emphatically. “When I was an atheist I thought Christianity was a dying religion. That’s nonsense; it’s like an explosion going off all the time.”

Though exuberant, she is a diabetic and receives six insulin injections each day. Without them, she says, she would die within 24 hours. In 1998 she went into a diabetic coma and later suffered an intestinal blockage.

Rice had gastric bypass surgery in 2003 and lost 25 pounds. Best of all, her chronic depression has disappeared.

She prays before writing and, although confident of her talent and skills, says that depicting the thoughts, attitudes and spirituality of the boy Jesus in her latest book is a task she takes very seriously.

“It feels frightening at times,” she admits. “But it never feels anything less than incredibly exhilarating. Even the terror is exciting. I wake up thinking: I can’t do this. I can’t, I can’t.

“And the terror is inside: How am I going to do this? Christ is sinless, yet He is tempted. He’s a healthy man, yet sinless. How do I do this?

"But then I say: 'I am going to do this somehow. I am going to make this a fictional reality in which a person can enter and be close to Christ.'"

Christ the Lord is the first of four novels Rice will write about Jesus' life. In the postscript, she asks, "After all, is Christ our Lord not the ultimate supernatural hero?"

Published by Alfred A. Knopf, the book portrays the Savior as supernatural, as well as sinless and serious. It provides a well-researched but historically debatable look at the lifestyle and events surrounding the young Jesus.

"To me it's the most gorgeous and beautiful mystery I could ever think about," Rice says. "God became this man who descended, not just for a day or a week. He was born here and grew up here and lived here over 30 years. I could meditate on this until my head explodes."

The story tells of Christ's family fleeing Bethlehem and living in Egypt's largest city, Alexandria, where Jesus studied the Torah and learned Greek under Hellenistic philosopher Philo. Joseph leads his extended family home to Nazareth by way of Jerusalem during the brutal Jewish uprising against King Herod Archelaus.

Rice's literary license is broad if not breathtaking. Jesus makes it snow and heals his uncle. An off-handed curse kills an attacking bully whom He later brings back to life. He makes a group of clay pigeons fly away.

The huge family sleeps in the same room. In the book Mary

never sleeps with Joseph, and Jesus' brother James is seen as Joseph's son by a previous marriage. Both parents seek to protect Jesus by keeping secret the miraculous details of His birth and the reason for the flight to Egypt.

On some levels, Jesus always understands He is God yet on other levels gradually realizes what that means.

"I really do believe and I hope it comes across in the book that Jesus is God and at any given time can know anything He wants, yet He might not want to because He is human and going through this for us," Rice says. "He knows we can approach Him more easily if He has been through suffering, persecution and temptation."

Rice researched the book for three years using a variety of sources, but most scholars doubt Christ spoke Greek and was already 7 years old when the Jews rose up against Herod. In addition, it is set during a period of time the Bible is silent about.

The Infancy Gospels of Thomas, Rice's source of two childhood miracles by Jesus, were reportedly used by the Gnostics, a heretical group that believed special knowledge was needed for salvation. Rice insists no reputable scholar considers them Gnostic teachings.

"Gnosticism is heresy, and I have no interest in it," she says. "The most radical thing I did was use the Apochrya legends, which some people think are the Gnostic gospels. It has nothing to do with the Gnostic gospels. The Infancy Gospels of Thomas are far different."

Doubts about that and her source material caused some Christian bookstore chains to keep her book from their shelves. Yet it is consistently reverent.

Rice hopes the same people who call to ask if her vampire creation Lestat is a real person will also believe that the shepherds saw angels, the wise men came and Mary bore Jesus as a virgin.

"I know that many, many of the people I'm writing for don't believe any of that," the author notes. "I'm just struggling to get it right. And it's worth all the work if I can reach one person who reads the book and says, 'I want to know more.'"

Rice's typical characters are complex, conflicted and confused, their lives riddled with paradox. Rice was like them, a prodigal daughter on a long day's journey into light. The journey had a nexus moment in June 2002 when she walked into St. Mary's Assumption Church in New Orleans for counsel and prayer.

"I said to God: 'I won't write anything anymore except for You. I don't care what happens. You figure it out, how I take care of the people and things I have to take care of. It will work out. And I will not write another book about vampires. I'm not going to glamorize evil. I'm not going to write another book about anything except what's for You.' And I walked out of that church a changed person."

Getting there, however, had taken her a lifetime.

'I Lost My Faith'

Rice was born in New Orleans, where her father Howard Allen O'Brien worked in the post office and her mother, Katherine, stayed home, read palms and drank. Named "Howard" after her father, Rice would often join her namesake at dusk in their blue-collar neighborhood to walk through the cemeteries and gaze at the above-ground crypts.

Having two aunts who were nuns and a cousin who was a priest, she was confirmed in the Catholic Church at age 12. She adopted a saint's name, following a family tradition, hers being Alphonsus Liguori. Afterward, "Howard" became "Anne."

She attended Catholic school, went to Mass daily and even followed a tradition of visiting 12 churches on Fridays. She was disappointed when she learned women could not become priests and begged her father to let her enter a convent. He insisted she first finish high school.

Katherine died of complications from alcoholism when Rice was 14. She remembers that her mother described her disease as "a craving in the blood"—a malady that was shared by Katherine's father and grandfather. Her father later married Dorothy Van Bever, and for a time Rice and her sisters lived in a Catholic boarding school.

She moved with her family to Richardson, Texas, near Dallas, and at her first public school met Stan Rice. He was an avid atheist, but the two shared a love of the arts. When Rice attended Texas Women's University she was drawn to the literary fad of existentialism, and her faith soon underwent a crisis.

"All of this was forbidden by the church," she says. "I broke with the rigid perception of what it meant to be a Catholic. I didn't grow up in a university community, so I didn't have the intellectual equipment to deal with doubts and shades of gray. Had I gone to a Catholic college it might have been different. But it is pointless to say that. I lost my faith."

At 19, she moved to San Francisco just as the hippie era was dawning there. After Stan proposed by telegram, she returned to Texas where they were married in a civil ceremony.

The couple moved to San Francisco's counterculture Haight-Ashbury district, got jobs and went to college. Stan painted and became a nationally known poet. When he was teaching at San Francisco State University, Rice, then 24, gave birth to Michele, a brown-haired, blue-eyed child they nicknamed "Mouse."

At age 4, Michele came down with a constant fever, and a doctor told the Rices their daughter had leukemia. The couple was spending the night with Michele in her hospital room when she died, one month before her 6th birthday.

Transformation

Five weeks later Rice finished *Interview With the Vampire*, a story about Louis—a 17th century New Orleans vampire and former member of the Catholic Church who was dealing with the death of his brother and his need for blood.

Though the couple drank heavily, Rice says she never became angry with God over Michele's death. Still, her fictional characters wavered between belief and despair as they wrestled

with timeless themes of good and evil.

Apparently, so did Rice.

“To me the vampire was a metaphor for the lost person disconnected with God,” she says. “There I was, lost and groping and convinced on some level that faith in God was impossible. But that was all I could do at that time. I thought we were lost and not created by a loving God, and this concept was a myth.”

Using a pseudonym, she wrote four pornographic novels, and under her name wrote books on the Mayfair family of witches and a 10-book series on vampires. In 1978 the couple had a son, Christopher, and in 1988 they moved into a New Orleans mansion.

They traveled to research locations and, oddly, visited Israel, where Rice says she became impressed by the survival of the Jewish nation. She read C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* and by 1998 was again reading the Bible.

She came to realize that writing about witches and vampires fed her chronic depression. God began dealing with her, she says, and she found that the same verse she read at night began to show up randomly—in another book, or when she and her sister Karen read the Bible together.

“The verse in the Gospel of John when Jesus is saying, ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in Me,’ kept coming to me,” Rice recalls, referring to John 6:53. She says she came to understand that for both Christians and fictional vampires eternal life lies

in the blood.

In her books Rice explored gay sex and glamorized androgyny. When she learned that her own son, Christopher—today a successful novelist—was gay, she knew his lifestyle could endanger him physically and also block her return to Christ, since the Catholic Church condemned homosexuality. She once asked a Christian friend how she could return to the church when the priest says her son is going to hell.

“He thought for a moment and said, ‘Our God is a merciful God,’” she recalls. “That started me on the glimpse—that God will work it out, He will take care of everything. He is not going to let someone go to hell by mistake.

“If someone is going to hell, it is because they rejected Him. God made the world. He will let them know.”

In 1998, she confessed her sins and received Holy Eucharist, the sacrament of communion, in which Catholics believe the bread and wine become the very body and blood of Christ. She and Stan renewed their marriage vows—this time in a church.

Tragically, in 2002, Stan was diagnosed with a brain tumor and died less than four months later. Anne’s epiphany moment in a church pew closely followed.

“Certainly at that moment something incredible happened,” she says. “It was like untying a knot. I was finally able to say, ‘I love You too, Christ.’ The effect was unbelievable. I was transformed. I knew I was talking directly to Christ.”

A New Chapter

Rice left New Orleans a year before Hurricane Katrina and moved into a large seacoast home in La Jolla, California, near San Diego. She found it damp and cool and the sidewalk filled with hundreds of fans waiting to see her when she'd leave for church. In the winter of 2005-2006 she moved to sunny Rancho Mirage.

Today Rice will write only about Christian redemption. The Road to Cana, the second volume of her series about the life of Christ, is scheduled by Knopf for publication in March. It will cover the life of Jesus from the time He starts His ministry to the wedding feast at Cana, where the Bible records He performed His first miracle, changing water into wine.

Says Rice of book two: "It's my full answer to the DaVinci Code, and more, I hope and pray."

She also wants to write a Christian play. Given her enormous fan base, she has the potential to depict Christ as Lord to millions of unsaved people.

She constantly studies and reads the Gospels. And she gathers regularly with Sue Tebbe and Becket Ghioto to pray. Each Sunday she attends church locally.

Rice firmly believes in the power of prayer and that Jesus has the power to heal today, but she says her message to the world, at least for now, is that God is love.

"This, for me, is what I want to emphasize; this is what I want to say. I guess one of the greatest gifts we can get is to actually feel Him, and those times when we can talk about

His love with conviction and not feel self-conscious.

“I always thought that to go back to the church, to believe again, was the annihilation of one’s spirit and brain. But I feel I’ve opened the door on this immense palace just gilded with riches and filled with rooms and vistas waiting to be explored.

“That’s my belief and my church and my relationship with God. It’s just filled with beauty. That I can find the mystery of the Incarnation radiating and exploding in everything, the source of light itself, it’s just unbelievable.”

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